POLICY BRIEF

Labor Unions and Civic Participation: How Unions Can Increase Member Engagement

Tova Wang, Stanislav Rivkin, and Eli Melendrez[1]

SEPTEMBER 2026

HARVARD Kennedy School
ASH CENTER
for Democratic Governance and Innovation

CL JE
CENTER FOR LABOR & A JUST ECONOMY
AT HARVARD LAW SCHOOL

POLICY BRIEF

Labor Unions and Civic Participation: How Unions Can Increase Member Engagement

Tova Wang, Stanislav Rivkin, and Eli Melendrez[1]

SEPTEMBER 2026

About the Ash Center and the Center for Labor and a Just Economy

The mission of the Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation is to develop ideas and foster practices that advance equal, inclusive, multiracial, and multiethnic democracy and self-government. From sovereignty and civil resistance to technology and elections, we are advancing democracy today while imagining a better version for tomorrow.

Founded with support from the Ford Foundation, the Ash Center is part of the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.

The Center for Labor and a Just Economy (CLJE) is Harvard Law School's hub of collaborative research, policy, and strategies to empower working people to build an equitable economy and democracy. Through convening stakeholders, disseminating ideas, advising policymakers, and shaping how the media understands progressive labor issues, the Center is committed to reimagining the law and developing paradigm-shifting policy. The Ash Center is proud to partner with CLJE on this and other projects looking at the intersection of labor and democracy.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Ash Center, Harvard Kennedy School, the Center for Labor and a Just Economy, or Harvard University. This research is intended to inform public understanding and foster thoughtful discussion of important public policy challenges and solutions. To learn more, visit ash.harvard.edu.

This paper is copyrighted by the author(s). It cannot be reproduced or reused without permission. Pursuant to the Ash Center's Open Access Policy, this paper is available to the public at ash.harvard.edu free of charge.

A PUBLICATION OF THE

Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation
Harvard Kennedy School
79 John F. Kennedy Street
Cambridge, MA 02138
617-495-0557
ash.harvard.edu

About the Authors

Tova Wang is the Director of Research Projects in Democratic Practice at the Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation. She was most recently Director of Policy and Research at the Center for Secure and Modern Elections, where she worked on voter registration reform and oversaw and conducted research on how to develop transformative strategies for increasing political participation among marginalized groups. She's been working on improving democracy since the 2000 presidential election, including several years as a Senior Democracy Fellow at Demos. Wang has focused on issues related to greater political inclusion in the United States, including major studies on increasing voter participation rates among low-income people, communities of color, naturalized immigrants, women, and Native Americans. Her critically acclaimed book, *The Politics of Voter Suppression: Defending and Expanding Americans' Right to Vote*, was published in 2012 by Cornell University Press. She has also consulted for international organizations on voting rights, election reform, and constitutional reform in countries around the world for many years.

Eli Melendrez received his Master in Public Policy in 2026 from the Harvard Kennedy School, where his research focused on the relationship between union membership, civic engagement, and democratic participation. He is a policy professional and labor movement advocate with seven years of experience at the intersection of electoral campaigns, legislative strategy, and union organizing. He spent nearly five years as a Government Relations Associate at the Texas American Federation of Teachers, where he directed statewide advocacy campaigns, coordinated with AFL-CIO affiliates, and fought for the professional and economic interests of educators and working people.

Stanislav Rivkin is the Senior Associate Director of Admissions at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, where he works to identify and recruit the next generation of leaders equipped to meet our central civic challenges. His research examines how to broaden civic and electoral engagement and strengthen public trust in elections. As a research assistant at Harvard's Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation, he co-authored reports on improving the relationship between election administrators and the media as a check on misinformation, and on how locating polling sites in professional sports stadiums increased turnout. He holds an MPA from the Harvard Kennedy School and, as a community organizer, ran for Cambridge City Council on a platform of local democratic reform and the needs of low-income residents.

Contents

Executive Summary 1
- Implications and Practical Suggestions for Unions 2

Introduction 2

Literature Review 3
- Hypothesis 1: Building a Sense of Community Increases Engagement 3
- Hypothesis 2: Learning About and Practicing Democracy Leads to Increased Voter Participation and Civic Engagement 4

Methodology 5

Themes and Research Questions 6
- Hypothesis 1: Building a Sense of Community Increases Engagement 6
- Hypothesis 2: Learning About and Practicing Democracy Leads to Increased Voter Participation and Civic Engagement 10

Implications and Practical Suggestions for Unions 19

Conclusion 20

Appendix A 21
- Next Steps for Research 21
- Questions for Subsequent Research 21

Appendix B 23
- Descriptive Analysis of Statistical Data 23
- Descriptive Analysis (from ChatGPT) of Free Response Answers 24
- Statistical Analysis 25

Notes 27

Executive Summary

This paper investigates how and why union membership is associated with higher levels of civic and political engagement, moving beyond prior work that has largely established the existence of this relationship. Drawing on interviews, focus groups, and a survey of Harvard Trade Union Program participants, the authors explore two main hypotheses: (1) unions cultivate a sense of community, shared values, and collective action that build members' sense of efficacy and agency; and (2) unions function as "schools of democracy," offering concrete opportunities to practice democratic skills and behaviors that can transfer to broader civic life. Although the data are nonrepresentative, drawn primarily from highly active union members, they illuminate specific practices that may serve as pathways from union participation to civic engagement and suggest avenues for further inquiry.

A central finding is the importance of "belonging before belief," a term coined by Professor Hahrie Han of Johns Hopkins University. Members who experience the union as a social community — through friendships, family-friendly events, and recurring small-group settings — are far more likely to feel a sense of belonging and, in turn, engage civically. Survey data show that respondents who view fellow members as an important part of their social life are dramatically more likely to engage in union-led political activities and vote in local elections. Small groups, committees, and leadership cohorts are particularly powerful, providing a safer space to build trust, voice opinions, practice dialogue and disagreement, and develop confidence that translates into broader participation in campaigns, rallies, and elections.

Unions also connect workers to politics by making public issues personal and actionable. Participants describe efforts to tie policy developments directly to working conditions, pay, and job security, using newsletters, rapid-response alerts, and one-on-one outreach to clarify stakes while leveraging workers' unique expertise. Because members often trust their unions as political information sources more than other institutions, both mass and relational appeals are particularly effective. Some unions explicitly encourage members to see the union itself — not a particular party — as their "political home," serving as a vehicle for challenging corporate power regardless of partisan alignment.

Consistent with existing research, the study finds that unions serve as "schools of democracy" by developing concrete civic skills — public speaking, organizing, policy analysis, negotiation, and strategic action — through leadership trainings, political education programs, committee work, and opportunities to testify or meet with elected officials. These experiences demystify political institutions and increase members' confidence in expressing their opinions publicly: most survey respondents report that union participation made them more confident in speaking out, and those who participate in union-led activities like rallies are substantially more likely to work on political campaigns. However, low turnout in internal union elections and uneven event attendance show that not all democratic opportunities translate into broad engagement, highlighting that internal democratic practice itself is an area for growth.

Technology emerges as a double-edged sword. Virtual meetings and digital platforms can increase attendance and reach geographically dispersed members, especially those with caregiving responsibilities or long commutes. At the same time, participants worry that online engagement can encourage shallower forms of participation and weaken social bonds if not paired with in-person, relational activities.

Overall, while additional research is necessary, the study supports both hypotheses: unions build community and teach democracy, thereby driving increased civic engagement. The paper concludes with practical implications to strengthen both internal engagement and external civic participation, summarized below. The authors recommend further representative and experimental research to rigorously test which specific practices — such as small-group participation, leadership trainings, and more social events — most effectively boost civic and electoral engagement.

Implications and Practical Suggestions for Unions

- Create recurring opportunities for members to connect in small groups.
- Provide trainings and other activities to build leadership skills and capacity that translate across issues and campaigns while fostering confidence and a sense of agency.
- Offer opportunities for socializing outside of the workplace.
- Reallocate a small portion of resources from paid political mobilization to longer-term community-building efforts.
- Create programs that help members develop the skills they need to work through policy issues and become advocates.
- Partner with aligned organizations and other unions that focus on different issues.
- Conduct individualized outreach.
- Make the issues at stake personal to the individual, rather than part of a national debate.
- Reduce logistical barriers to participation.
- Give members roles that provide agency rather than asking them to perform predetermined tasks.
- Employ mentors.
- Encourage members to vote in union elections.
- Balance digital and face-to-face activities.
- Communicate and celebrate wins, even small ones.
- Connect across party identity by clarifying how positions and candidate endorsements align with and advance the priorities of members and working people, regardless of broad ideology or identity.

Introduction

Previous research has demonstrated that union members are more likely to vote than non-union members,[2] controlling for all other factors including socioeconomic status and union voter mobilization.[3] This paper investigates how and why union membership is associated with higher levels of civic and political engagement, moving beyond prior work that has largely established the existence of this relationship.

This study aims to provide some preliminary ideas for experimentation and insights to unions and other practitioners, while identifying questions to help researchers understand what specific aspects of union membership increase voter participation and other types of civic engagement. Because it is beyond the scope of this study to establish direct causation, we identify union activities and practices that may serve as pathways to greater civic participation worth further exploration. We also identify practices that may act as impetuses for greater civic engagement but require additional research to confirm. As a result, we include potential research questions at the conclusion of this paper to further illuminate these effects.

Based on a review of relevant literature and interviews with members and leaders of two Northeast unions, one a large education union and the other a relatively small industrial union local, as well as surveys and focus groups with Harvard Trade Union Program participants, we frame our questions through the lens of two core hypotheses:

- Unions build a sense of community, bonding around shared values, and collective action that increase efficacy and agency among members.
- Unions function as schools of democracy, providing members with skill-building experiences that mirror external democratic practices and information they need to engage in democratic practices both inside and outside the union.

Literature Review

Hypothesis 1: Building a Sense of Community Increases Engagement

First, this study builds on a theme that consistently emerges from existing literature on how involvement in unions or other organizations leads to higher participation rates, fostering a sense of community and collective consciousness.

More broadly, the most effective organizations employ strategies that bind members together such that they recognize the value of collaboration and solidarity. One way to look at how this might play out in the labor movement is by examining how unions historically cultivated these relationships and where modern unions fall short.

Lainey Newman and Theda Skocpol's "Rust Belt Union Blues"[4] primarily explores the erosion of union influence in American politics and the migration of many members to the Republican Party. It is particularly pertinent to a discussion of how union communities drove active civic work and democratic values in the past and how they might still do so in localized pockets today. Newman and Skocpol observe, "Unions of the mid-20th century were involved in almost every dimension of life for workers but also in spiritual or religious groups; in political activities; and (perhaps most underestimated) in recreation, family engagement, and community events."[5] They suggest that this engagement built bonds among members and union families, which in turn promoted political solidarity.

Political scientist Hahrie Han has studied the role of organizations in increasing civic engagement for many years, and much of her work applies directly to unions. One recurrent theme of her work is the importance of relationships, and in her more recent writing, the concept of "belonging before belief" stands out. She writes about this in her book, "Undivided,"[6] and spoke about it pointedly in a recent address at Harvard. Han argues that people need to feel connected before they get involved in a meaningful way, which comes before they are fully committed to the cause at hand. This suggests that unions, like other organizations, need to stop assuming members must connect around a shared workers' rights identity before participating, and instead focus on developing a shared identity through connection itself.

She further argues that sustained engagement requires people to be part of the solution-building process and in ways that will foster agency. For unions, this indicates that by engaging members in strategy and decision-making at the front end, perhaps they can allow people to feel like they can "become something" through the experience of working in relationship with others rather than just contribute to something somebody else has already created. In today's organizations, she asserts, "people are spoon-fed a menu of participatory actions they can take that are most likely to be solitary, expressive acts in which their

individual gifts and complexities are not taken into account."[7] Too often, she continues, they are being asked "to add their voice to forms of expression that other people develop. Rarely are people offered the chance to strategize as agents about what to do. Rarely are those actions nested in political organizations that engender loyalties through which people generate democratic capacities."[8]

Professor Katrina Gamble of Sojourn Strategies describes places that foster community bonds as ones where "individuals can build community with others who have shared values to impact change."[9] She calls these "political homes," writing, "the idea of a political home is about much more than politics and elections. It is as much about belonging and connectedness as it is about building political power." This sense of social community draws people to organizations and keeps them there over time. Evidence suggests that this is true for unions, and that community building may be the more transformative mechanism through which unions build civically engaged memberships.

A nuance of the hypothesis that unions serve as communities for collective action is that union culture varies widely. Research indicates that the type of union and its culture influence how effectively it promotes democratic engagement among its members. Some unions adopt a social movement mindset, an approach that integrates issues such as racial justice, immigrant rights, and environmental concerns into their regular programming. In a 2011 article, sociologist Veronica Terriquez highlights how social movement unions allocate significant resources to developing leadership skills among members and encouraging participation in broader causes.[10] In doing so, these unions not only address workplace issues but also foster deeper civic involvement among their rank-and-file members.

Similarly, Bruce Nissen, a former professor of labor studies,[11] finds that unions using traditional labor organizing tactics — focused primarily on wages and working conditions — tend to be less effective at cultivating political engagement than those that expand their messaging and support networks into other politically salient issues. Nissen's research reveals that unions operating within a social movement framework are more likely to inspire members to participate in political campaigns and engage with issues beyond their immediate workplace concerns.

Hypothesis 2: Learning About and Practicing Democracy Leads to Increased Voter Participation and Civic Engagement

A number of studies on unions and voter turnout demonstrating higher rates of participation among members cite the practice of democracy within the union as an explanation for those higher numbers. In a 2006 study, Jan Leighley and Jonathan Nagler found that union members were more likely than nonunion members to vote in presidential and congressional elections.[12] Jake Rosenfeld expanded on this in 2010, showing that the effect of union membership on voting is strongest for the least educated members.[13] Finally, in 2013, Jasmine Kerrissey and Evan Schofer built upon this research by demonstrating that, in addition to the least-educated members, the impact of union membership on voting is strongest for members with lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Kerrissey and Schofer expanded their study to include other civic engagement activities, like volunteering on campaigns, joining protests and rallies, and participating in non-union community organizations (such as churches, schools, etc.). They found that union members are 43% more likely to volunteer and 73% more likely to protest.[14]

A few studies have dug deeper into the specific union activities that build civic skills and prepare members to serve in public forums of democracy. Exposure to political discussions

within these spaces is potentially a key factor in fostering political engagement. Sarah Sobieraj and Deborah White emphasize that simply participating in voluntary associations, including unions, does not automatically increase political participation.[15] Without structured political dialogue, even active involvement in unions has limited impact on members' civic behavior. These findings suggest that the quality of discourse within a union shapes how members understand and engage with political issues.

Alexander Hertel-Fernandez's research found that union members are "substantially more likely to be politically active in the workplace and to report using politically relevant skills on the job."[16] Moreover, he found that union members are 36% to 58% more likely to have been "engaged in politics at work by coworkers — for example, by having a coworker ask them to support a political cause, candidate or campaign; remind them to vote; or inform them about a new political issue."[17] This may indicate that discussions within unions and the political education members receive have ripple effects among other workers in a unionized workplace. In addition, he observes, union members are more likely to "build and use civic skills in the workplace than non-union members." This indicates that being in a union impacts both the level of civic skills and the likelihood of putting them into practice.

Additionally, Nissen highlights how unions frame labor issues to engage members politically.[18] One effective strategy involves framing campaigns through a social welfare perspective, emphasizing that the outcomes benefit not only union members but also the broader public. This approach makes members see their work as a contribution to societal well-being, enhancing their connection to larger social and political issues.

Beyond political discussions, union leadership and training programs play a crucial role in developing members' abilities and fostering engagement beyond the workplace. Terriquez highlights the Service Employees International Union's investments in skill-building initiatives designed to empower members.[19] In interviews, active members shared that the skills they gained from union training were directly transferable to leadership roles within their communities, such as positions on school boards or parent associations. These programs not only enhance members' professional abilities but also give them the confidence and tools to take on leadership roles in public service.

Methodology

In addition to conducting the above literature review and examining the history of two unions, we interviewed eight education union members and nine industrial union local members for approximately one hour each. We recruited participants through ads in each union's newsletter and leadership outreach. To identify themes and questions for further research, we analyzed transcriptions of the interviews. We also examined the newsletters of both unions and their social media posts for the 2024 calendar year.

To further explore the link between union membership and civic engagement, we conducted an online survey of 109 2025 Harvard Trade Union Program (HTUP) participants (see Appendix B for full analysis and breakdown of the unions represented in the sample). Additionally, in January 2026, we held three focus groups with 2026 HTUP participants and conducted follow-up conversations with three focus group members. While these data sources are not representative of the broader U.S. labor movement, and selection bias is present, they illuminate specific practices that may serve as pathways to civic engagement. Given the small pool of interviewees and nature of the data, we underscore that what follows is not intended to serve as definitive findings, but rather potentially fruitful threads for further study.

Themes and Research Questions

The balance of this report presents key themes identified from interviews, focus groups, and survey results — themes that suggest questions for future research on union member participation. These insights are structured in accordance with the two hypotheses we identified in the introduction.

Hypothesis 1: Building a Sense of Community Increases Engagement

Small-Group Belonging

Hahrie Han argues that engaging in small groups within a larger community can "draw the benefits of deep, intimate connection to a group of people" and through these relationships link them to the broader organization, as well as provide a sense of participating in "something larger than themselves."[20] Indeed, respondents from both the education union and the industrial union indicated that establishing a sense of belonging within small groups helped them develop stronger engagement in union activities, while providing the support needed to grow their sense of social and political agency.

Interviewees noted that they were more likely to form friendships and emotional attachments to some aspect of the union when they shared meaningful and substantive experiences in reoccurring small-group formats, such as the machinist training at the industrial local or on a committee within the education union. These connections to "nested groups" and individuals specifically helped keep several of the respondents engaged with their local when their frustrations with policy or politics might have otherwise alienated them. In contrast with the union at large, involvement with these tangible smaller units cultivates familiarity and trust over time. They are also not viewed as quite so transactional or extractive as larger union asks.

As a result, many respondents view small-group formats as safer spaces to practice dialogue and debate. The education union appears to achieve this effectively in its weekly policy program by setting community norms for discussion and scaffolding dialogue around controversial issues, nudging participants to listen to one another, ask questions, and welcome disagreement. This practice is especially relevant as these tools are applied to questions of policy. By the end of the eight-month program, participants appear to freely share and accept feedback, support one another, and take on greater leadership roles within the local.

A sense of belonging to a small group has proven widely effective in helping participants develop confidence in voicing their opinions. For example, one education union respondent noted that she now feels more comfortable speaking up at union meetings because she feels supported by a nested group of individuals she knows well. Likewise, an industrial union respondent mentioned that meeting virtually with a small national-level group helps him grow by pushing him out of his comfort zone and encouraging him to take on more prominent roles. Another industrial member emphasized how combining mentorship with a sense of small-group belonging improved his ability and willingness to speak publicly.

Numerous respondents noted that small-group dynamics also improved their comfort with and likelihood of participating in political activity. Several mentioned that group activities helped them overcome their inhibitions around daunting political activity, such as rallying for a candidate. Others noted that collective engagement was simply more enjoyable, making reoccurring involvement more likely. Survey data strongly reflects the connection between a sense of local community belonging and political participation: HTUP respondents who

strongly agreed that their union was a community that they belonged to were more than 11 times more likely to participate in union-led political campaign activities, such as phone banking or canvassing. Furthermore, small-group participants and committee members within the union were approximately two times more likely to vote in local elections.

Social Community

Overall, existing literature, other types of organizations' experiences, and labor's own history suggest that social activities can build a sense of belonging and community within unions. Survey data from the HTUP strongly reinforces this concept, as respondents who indicated that "fellow union members are an important part of my social life" were 17 times more likely to believe their union was a community they belonged to.

However, the degree to which workers felt a sense of social community within their locals varied widely. The industrial union members were much more likely to indicate a sense of community, though this disparity likely reflects factors such as physical proximity and the union's relatively smaller size. Among older members, there was widespread nostalgia for the stronger sense of community that characterized the union in the past. This shift is not due to a lack of effort by leadership; while they offer numerous community events and activities, only a small group takes advantage of them.

Members of the unions studied also note that the unions provide an opportunity to cultivate friendships and socialize. While both unions reinforced community and belonging through engagement in recreational and family events, the industrial union particularly emphasized this form of community building. This was perhaps best illustrated by the industrial union's annual holiday party. Hosted at the local YMCA, it's open to union members, retirees, and their guests, with a focus not on the members themselves but on their children and families. The event includes face painting, carnival games, food, and other activities. While on-site events like potlucks and ice cream socials foster day-to-day connection among members, participants emphasized the importance of holding special off-site events and including family to deepen social ties beyond standard workplace relationships.

Older members with long union histories use recreational events like holiday parties to deepen younger members' involvement. Union leaders go out of their way to connect individually with members and invite them to these events. In general, social events seemed less important for education union members, which is unsurprising given the larger and more dispersed membership. However, the education union celebrates cultural holidays, such as Kwanzaa and the Lunar New Year, reflecting the diversity of its membership. Additionally, they have an annual fall gathering, winter gathering, and end-of-year gathering.

Focus group participants also referenced social gatherings such as baseball games, back-to-school giveaways, and annual summer picnics, emphasizing that these events — which often include family members and children — are key benefits for members.

Local Identity

Union organizers often seek to foster a strong sense of local identity among members, partly to drive greater engagement with union activities. By connecting members with their local, union organizers aim to create a sense of solidarity that incentivizes workers to contribute to the general welfare of their union. Some workers reported that that sense of responsibility extended to the national union or the broader world, inspiring them to engage with a larger set of issues beyond what materially affects them as individuals. For others, their sense of responsibility only extended to fellow members of their local. Local identity is primarily

reinforced through four aspects of the union experience: shared spaces, cross-organizational collaborations, public displays of identity, and collective gatherings.

Union members, particularly in the industrial union, highlighted union halls as vital spaces for building a sense of community. Within the industrial union, that sense of community extended beyond their own hall to include allied organizations, such as a regional labor council and mission-aligned tenants within their building, including a local civic group dedicated to organizing working-class people across the region. Members stated that sharing a building with issue-based organizations creates "cross-pollination" between groups, exposing members to different civic causes and political discussions. Having physical proximity to advocacy organizations allows union members to easily participate in other movements, strengthening their engagement in local and national issues and broadening their sense of community responsibility.

A salient difference between the two unions' ability to develop a local identity is the concentration of workers at a given site. The majority of the industrial union workers are assigned to one location, whereas education union members are spread across dozens of campuses. Even for the industrial members working on separate tasks during separate shifts, the shared experience of working at a single site reinforced a sense of local identity. Education union members often distinguished between their school identity and their local union identity, reporting closer connections to their on-campus colleagues than to the broader local. Some educators from well-resourced schools cited their school's success as a reason to step back from union driven efforts, while others cited the relative privilege of their campus as a reason to engage more actively to lift less-resourced schools.

The industrial union's membership in coalitions that leverage local identity appears to foster a broader sense of civic responsibility. The union regularly partners with other groups on policy issues, such as affordable housing, that affect not only union members but the entire community. By participating in coalitions, members realize that just as union members share common interests during contract negotiations, coalition members (and thus the broader working class) share similar policy interests. Utilizing their collective power as a union to gain leverage over their contract teaches workers the value of acting collectively to effect change. In turn, these shared interests instill a shared identity. Organizing around them creates a shared sense of power, which can reinforce both union and a broader community identity.

For the education union and the industrial union, public displays of their local identity deepened members' connection to that identity. Members of both unions often wear matching T-shirts to celebratory events, political demonstrations, and voter outreach drives. Publicly identifying with the union reinforces solidarity. Wearing the same T-shirt or hat as your fellow union members is itself a form of civic engagement in some contexts. By wearing a union T-shirt to a school board meeting or a contract negotiation, members leverage their strength in numbers, signaling to school boards or negotiators that they endorse their union's position on the issue at hand, thereby increasing the union's power. While this display of power serves an explicit political purpose, it also reinforces shared identity, especially in communal or celebratory contexts. To capitalize on this effect, education union leadership regularly directs its members to wear union T-shirts to school on set days, typically around bargaining periods.

Finally, collective gatherings reinforce local identity. These gatherings are especially important for education union members, the majority of whom do not work on the same campus.

Working-Class and Labor Identity

Both unions strive to root their members' sense of belonging within broader labor and working-class identities, creating a multilayered connection to the local while expanding members' perceived contributions to a broader movement. While our research did not examine the degree to which organizers effectively actuated this perspective among members or whether this resulted in increased civic engagement, we note the practices of our two case-study locals to highlight opportunities for future research.

The industrial union's newsletters often position the union's challenges as a broader confrontation between "the working class" and "workers" against multinational corporate interests. To reinforce this message, front-page stories and columns authored by leadership depict the efforts of labor groups across the country as a shared battle against an increasingly exploitative economic system.

Similarly, education union newsletters consistently position members within a broader labor identity, frequently using terms like "union siblings" and "labor movement," emphasizing solidarity with other unions and workers. These communications also demonstrate support for unrelated labor organizations, encouraging members to join their "siblings" at rallies and pickets.

Political Homes

Both case-study unions devote significant attention to justifying the union's role and utility, carving out a political identity that is centered within the union and demonstrating their unique capacity to provide members with essential resources.

In the industrial union's newsletters, leadership directly appeals to members to adopt the union — rather than a particular political party or ideology — as their political home and guarantor of empowerment, asking them to entrust labor with a mandate to disrupt a broken and exploitative political system. Regardless of party affiliation, members are called together to fight for working families through the union.

Partially due to the local political climate, the education union does not seek to create substantial distance between itself and the Democratic Party or explicitly call upon members to prioritize union over party. Rather, it often positions itself as a parallel source of power that is more immediately impactful in advocating for its members' interests.

This messaging from both unions appears to accurately reflect some respondents' feelings that their union serves as a source of empowerment and a "political home." Members from both unions reported that union education regarding employee rights and the potential to win better working conditions through the union has been critical to their understanding of agency and power in the workplace. Additionally, both unions educate members on the potential power of collective action through messaging that highlights tangible progress and major victories achieved on their members' behalf.

Industrial union respondents generally agreed that emphasizing winning is an effective tactic for conveying union necessity and capacity to members. Respondents noted that articles discussing the struggles of other unions effectively demonstrated their local's relative success, while articles showcasing the success of other unions expanded members' imagination regarding what might be attainable. Meanwhile, highlighting the union's tactical progress in negotiations or revisiting past victories in terms of member benefits served to keep members hopeful about the potential to extract wins in upcoming negotiations. While the education union was in the midst of contact negotiations during data collection and could not report on final negotiations, leadership nonetheless stressed tactical and strategic progress.

Hypothesis 2: Learning About and Practicing Democracy Leads to Increased Voter Participation and Civic Engagement

Collectively, our research supports the hypothesis that participation in particular union-related practices and activities increases civic engagement among members. For example, in our survey of HTUP participants, 76% of respondents reported that participating in union activities made them "much more confident" or "more confident" in expressing their opinion publicly, which could serve as a catalyst for greater engagement in public life. In total, our survey indicates at least five statistically significant correlations between union involvement and political activity, as detailed in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Union Activity	Political Activity	Odds Ratio[21]
Union-led political activities	Work on a political campaign	7.54
Rallies	Work on a political campaign	4.97
Committee/small group meetings	Vote in a local election	2.22
Union-led political activities	Vote in a local election	2.11
Union-led political activities	Donate money to political cause	2.05

Leadership Development

TRAININGS AND COMMITTEES

Both unions offer members a range of leadership development opportunities. Of all union activities, these trainings seemed to have the most direct correlation with building member skills, efficacy, and agency employed in broader democratic arenas outside the union.

The education union hosts seasonal trainings aimed at improving organizing skills and capacity. In addition, they offer a weekly elective program that allows members to participate in one of three ongoing classes, meeting one morning per month throughout the academic year. Respondents explained that the courses help participants better understand and leverage their lived experiences while developing key skills, enabling them to effect change first within their workplaces and subsequently across their broader communities.

Participants develop a diverse set of skills, including research, policy analysis, writing, organizing through one-on-one conversations, building support for a cause, and applying pressure to gatekeepers (including political pressure). Respondents agreed that their respective courses of study increased their confidence and preparedness to challenge power and advocate for their interests. In addition, the program regularly led to greater engagement within the union, leading members to join committees, participate in negotiations, or serve as building representatives.

Participation on education union committees plays a pivotal role in developing leadership skills for some members. Committees appear to accomplish their purpose of enabling activist members to channel their advocacy through the education union, particularly regarding non-core political issues, such as housing, environmental justice, inclusion, and immigrant support. As one member explained, her committee work helped her build her leadership skills and

acted as a gateway to political action. Through committee work, participants can learn the best practices of advocacy and strategic action, as well as skills such as collaboration, mobilization, facilitation, mediation, needs assessment, proposal development, and public speaking.

The industrial union provides leadership and organizing training primarily through contract-related actions, steward trainings, and occasional classes. In preparation for contract negotiations, the leadership team recruits a bargaining committee comprising 10% of the work site, chosen strategically to maximize participants' leadership potential and member networks. Each recruit adopts the informal title of "contract chair" and is responsible for identifying and regularly communicating with 10 to 15 additional members about upcoming actions. Endowing contract chairs with this responsibility appears to increase union activity at shops near contract negotiation periods effectively, though it remains unclear from interviews whether these informal leadership roles persist or lead to escalating involvement and responsibility.

LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES, RECRUITMENT, AND CULTIVATION

While our research suggests that these leadership development opportunities may improve external democratic engagement, they appear most effective when members perceive a meaningful reason to engage in democratic processes, view their roles as impactful, and believe they can provide a unique contribution.

Both unions illustrate several effective pathways to recruit and cultivate leadership, particularly during periods of heightened debate or negotiation. Respondents indicate that when active campaigns take place at the site, whether related to internal local politics or organizing actions against the employer, a greater number of members become significantly engaged and assume leadership roles. These roles include informal contract chairs for the industrial union, Contract Committee members for the education union, and additional informal roles — such as promoting a candidate for internal office or recruiting education union members to demonstrate at school committee meetings. While we only interviewed a few disengaged members, all from the education union, those respondents appeared to refrain from engaging with leadership opportunities because they either saw no pressing personal or collective need or perceived insufficient disagreement and differentiation among candidates and policies to warrant their involvement.

Respondents from both unions agreed that individualized, targeted requests for their participation on a given project was critical to their decision to take on greater responsibility. Respondents felt the greatest affinity toward participation when there was a clear role for them to assume and when the ask was personalized to leverage their individual talents, skills, and abilities. HTUP focus group participants emphasized the necessity of giving members active roles to develop a sense of ownership, advising, "Give 'em a job. . . . Doesn't matter what that job is, just give 'em a job. Find something for that person to do." Allowing members to take on concrete responsibilities, such as planning social events or fundraisers, is a crucial step in cultivating leadership. To foster this growth, members of both unions highlighted the importance of mentors in forming trusted relationships, providing opportunities for shadowing, identifying areas for growth, and encouraging mentees to grow their confidence and skills by assuming relevant responsibilities.

Educating Members About Democracy

Before discussing the substance of union education and information, it is essential to consider the media channels through which members are engaged.

Both unions further civic and political education through a combination of newsletters, programming, and social media, with newsletters serving as the primary organ for communication to all members. The education union distributes digital newsletters approximately 45 to 50 times per year at roughly weekly or biweekly intervals, while the industrial union distributes hard copies of its monthly newsletter to all members on the shop floor and publishes a digital version. The education union newsletter, authored by the union at large, addresses members directly, includes several recurring sections, and is written largely in the third person. In contrast, the industrial union newsletter consists primarily of recurring columns written by union leadership and presented almost exclusively from a first-person point of view.

Respondents from both unions agreed that the newsletter is widely read and effective in communicating messaging. Interest peaks around the time of union elections, pay negotiations or updates, and key meetings that a large portion of readers are unable to attend.

Likewise, both unions hold one-off classes and presentations for their members. These include ad hoc opportunities hosted by relevant committees, presentations during member meetings, and programming at local, regional, and national conferences.

Several members from our HTUP focus groups relied heavily on rapid alert notifications for both education and mobilization, sent to members via text or email. Focus group participants indicated these alerts vary in sophistication, with some messaging personalized to address topics that are most relevant to the member and tailored to include their elected representatives' vote records on a given issue.

Finally, social media serves as an important medium for education union messaging, with accounts on Instagram, Facebook, and X promoting social events, collective action, and successes. The industrial union also uses Facebook to promote social events, membership meetings, and technical announcements (such as pay stub issues at a particular site) rather than overtly educational messaging.

POLITICAL EDUCATION

Although the industrial union made only a few endorsements in the most recent election cycle, leadership aims to broadly educate members about the importance of political engagement and the necessity of understanding how candidates can advance union interests. Respondents conveyed that leadership explains its candidate endorsements, particularly those who are unpopular with rank-and-file members who lean Republican, by highlighting the union's need to exert influence over key decisions and the candidates' willingness to give the union a seat at the table with regard to decision making. Respondents largely agreed that most members understand this rationale for building relationships with politicians through endorsements, and while they may disagree with a candidate on various issues, they recognize that formal union support is warranted due to the candidate's support for union jobs. Education regarding political candidates' stances is also closely tied to contentious policies that negatively impact labor, such as trade.

Still, even highly topical mentions of politicians are seen as "contentious" among some members, according to several respondents, and as a result, much of the overtly political education is framed through a nonpartisan lens. Similarly, a course offered on inequality urges circumspection about the role of both major parties in diminishing labor rights and exacerbating inequality through trade agreements and corporate influence.

In contrast, the education union endorsed a far broader slate of candidates, with its newsletter including a sample ballot and frequent calls to vote. In the lead-up to the 2024

election, the union was particularly active in informing members about federal candidates and the implications of their policies on occupational concerns, regularly providing a variety of endorsement graphics.

For some education union members, political education and candidate endorsement fed a curiosity to learn more about political issues, engage in political dialogue, and, ultimately, vote. One member explained that her union engagement provided her with the "vocabulary" to provide personal political opinions and endorsements on social media while pushing her to take an interest in a broader range of elections.

In addition, a number of interviewees indicated that they view the union as a trusted source of information when it comes to candidate endorsements and issues. They have confidence that the union will advocate for their interests, even without their personal involvement, and trust information from the union more than other sources, knowing that they share underlying values. This inherent trust makes both mass and relational appeals for engagement more effective.

BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE ABOUT POLITICAL AND POLICY PROCESSES

In the industrial union, political education is often conveyed by establishing a general awareness of members' place within the broader national labor movement. The union accomplishes this primarily through its newsletter, which informs members about the growth of corporate influence in the political system and consequent policy trajectories, such as free trade and right-to-work laws, that have harmed the working class at large and union laborers in particular. In doing so, the newsletter aims to explicitly connect these events to the union's bread-and-butter concerns.

The industrial union also offers its members a limited number of nationally developed courses that engage with relevant policy issues. For example, a course on inequality, which the union offers occasionally to an invitation-only audience, highlights diminishing real wages for workers, growing ratios of corporate profits to worker earnings, and corporate power.

The education union focuses less of its centralized education on national socioeconomic issues, labor rights, or policy debates that are unrelated to the work of its members and their buildings. While these conversations sometimes arise when discussing candidate endorsements, during meetings, and through cause-oriented committees (often with a local focus), the union prioritizes the development of analytical and advocacy skills, as well as advancing a broad understanding of political and policy processes.

The education union offers a wide range of traditional and experiential educational opportunities. The policy program consists of a set of monthly course offerings designed to acquaint members with the vernacular, increase their comfort with approaching and dissecting policy, and help them apply this knowledge to issues of their choice. Respondents argued that these and similar courses help dismantle a key tool of power: the impenetrability of policy language and the resulting perception that advanced credentials are necessary to engage in advocacy. The class encourages members to explore the broader mechanics of policy, including stakeholders, intentions, construction, deliberation, and implementation, using proximal, everyday policies as an entry point, such as the bathroom pass policy at their school. The intention is not just for members to adopt particular positions or provide resources to a particular cause, but to build their own power through sustainable and replicable learning practices and attention to relevant issues.

EDUCATION ABOUT CORE LABOR ISSUES

Both unions prioritize educating members on core issues closely related to labor rights, benefits, and occupational roles and settings, rather than broader sociopolitical debates. This stems from a desire to maintain unity and provide space for broader ideological diversity amid potentially polarizing political disagreements, as well as a recognition that members are more receptive to a narrower and more unifying message. However, it remains difficult to strike a balance between advancing core issues and acknowledging the union's role as a civically responsible institution that takes stances regarding major noncore issues.

Unions often spur civic engagement by linking civic issues to the worker, efforts that focus group participants described as "making it personal" by tying policy developments directly to working conditions, pay, and job security. Furthermore, unions leverage members' unique expertise to educate and influence; for example, an elevator constructor used his specialized knowledge to lobby legislators to pass a bill requiring the inspection of home elevators, effectively tying his professional role to public safety.

For the industrial union, core issues include trade agreements and offshoring practices. Leadership conveys the importance of understanding and engaging with these issues by explaining that political action is necessary to build the structural and systemic conditions necessary to maintain union jobs.

The education union has employed its newsletters and, occasionally, its social media accounts to explain policy issues that closely relate to its members' work. One respondent credited the newsletters as a primary source of education for many regarding core issues and their impact on members' work and livelihoods.

While messaging largely focuses on core issues, each union provides a release valve for broader activism. The education union leadership encourages activist members to form or join committees, which can educate other members through committee-sponsored events and presentations at membership meetings. Policy topics include housing security, climate justice, restorative justice, support for Black Lives Matter, and advocacy for undocumented community members. For this particular membership, such committees have been relatively uncontroversial, providing an opportunity to engage more deeply for those who choose to. The industrial union provides members with access to local coalitions that advocate for a range of social support and social justice causes.

On rare occasions, the education union's leadership focuses on noncore issues that greatly impact members' well-being, such as concerns about affordability or parking, through direct messages, newsletters, and social media.

EDUCATION ABOUT INTERNAL DEMOCRATIC PRACTICE

As discussed, research shows that practicing democracy within a union may lead to greater democratic engagement with government. As a result, it stands to reason that an important intermediate step to external democratic practice is education that promotes engagement with the union's political process.

Furthermore, research suggests that level of union engagement plays a role in civic participation among members. For example, Terriquez finds that the most active union members — those who hold leadership roles or participate in union events — are more likely to engage in activism or assume leadership roles outside the workplace, such as within public schools.[22] In contrast, less active members show no significant increase in community or civic engagement. Nissen supports these findings in his study of a SEIU Florida healthcare union,[23]

with his survey data showing that 25% to 50% of union members reported increased interest in political activities due to their union involvement. Among union activists and leaders, the effect was even stronger, with nearly all respondents indicating that their union experience had transformed their political engagement. These studies highlight the importance of active participation in union activities in promoting broader civic and political involvement.

Both unions provide substantial education regarding opportunities to engage in internal democratic processes and union policy, largely through their respective newsletters. Following a vacancy or prior to an election-related deadline, both newsletters include information regarding the nomination and election process, list candidates seeking office, and provide comprehensive guidance on how to vote. Several industrial union members remarked that rank-and-file members seek out newsletters specifically for this information.

The industrial union also uses newsletters to provide information regarding its member meetings, which are more logistically complex than the education unions' due to their hybrid modality. Each newsletter details the upcoming meeting agenda, in-person and virtual addresses, and key rules for participating in online meetings.

Beyond official publications, one-on-one conversations have also proven critical for educating members on both elections and major national and local issues. The industrial union stewards have traditionally been tasked with hand-delivering newsletters and ad hoc flyers to each member on their floor, encouraging them to learn more about union business and opportunities for greater involvement, while also addressing individual concerns and inhibitions. Some respondents believe that these one-on-one interactions are among the most impactful pathways for educating members over time, particularly those who are initially reluctant to engage with the local or adopt its positions. Educational conversations are particularly common around wages and benefits, potential negotiations, and internal elections.

Practicing Democracy

MEETINGS

Both unions hold monthly membership meetings.

At the industrial union, these meetings — held both in person and via Zoom — are where key decisions are made. Executive board meeting minutes are presented, and every decision can be appealed or approved by the membership. Leadership takes special care to present controversial decisions at the meetings, and political endorsements are always called out. Much of the remaining time is spent addressing internal union processes. Members can easily petition for subjects to be placed on the meeting agenda. The education union also holds monthly membership meetings. However, their meetings are entirely in person, and attendance is ordinarily low.

Meetings and Skill Building

Meeting attendance is low for both unions, which dims the gatherings' potential impact on fostering democratic participation. What's more, those who do attend are more likely to be the kind of people who are already inclined to speak up. Still, some interviewees indicated that participating in both monthly member meetings and smaller worksite meetings increased their confidence in speaking up, voicing their opinions, and reaching out to leadership with concerns. Engaging in civic activities through the union also familiarizes members with the democratic process; for example, one organizer noted that while many members are initially intimidated to testify before legislators, doing so once "demystifies" the process and makes it

much more accessible. Some unions walk members through the process beforehand, turning hesitant individuals into eager volunteers who are comfortable speaking publicly.

Members offered a variety of opinions on why meeting attendance tends to be low. Some cited logistical challenges, while others felt it was not worth their time. Some noted that the issues on the agenda seemed already decided, while others expressed a general lack of interest. Nobody had easy answers to the problem.

In Person Versus Hybrid

Meeting modality is a common flashpoint within unions. In interviews and focus groups, many members indicated that in-person meetings appeared to improve participant engagement but were a major obstacle to attendance. This was especially true when the union hall was far from a member's worksite or home, or when members had to endure heavy traffic — a burden that was especially heavy for those with caregiving responsibilities. Likewise, virtual meetings present a double-edged sword; while they can increase attendance and reach geographically dispersed members, those with caregiving responsibilities, and those with long commutes, the lack of in-person relational pairing meant digital organizing could contribute to shallower forms of participation and weakened union ties.

Although a hybrid format may diminish the community-building aspects of in-person meetings, some interviewees and focus group participants felt it was worthwhile if virtual attendees became more aware of union updates and opportunities, ultimately leading to greater engagement in subsequent activities. Several interviewees also suggested attendance might increase if meetings were held in alternating locations or across different worksites.

The education union holds all meetings in person at their union hall, while the industrial union employs a hybrid style that offers both Zoom and in-person attendance at their union hall. Importantly, the industrial union is a much smaller union, potentially allowing for a smoother implementation of the meeting than would be possible with a larger one.

Meeting Discussion Topics

Meetings at both unions cover a variety of topics. As previously noted, participants expressed differing opinions on how much the union should focus on core workplace, labor issues, and/or labor-adjacent issues. This debate often emerged in the context of how meetings are organized. Specifically, participants identified the following topics as among those most frequently discussed at member meetings:

- Direct union issues, like contract negotiations
- Policy issues directly related to the union's work
- Broader policy issues not directly related to the work but important to the well-being of members and their families
- Political endorsements
- Event announcements
- Committee news

As observed with respect to political education, there is some disagreement about which topics best encourage member participation — subjects specifically of interest to their work as a union or broader issues that may impact them or their community more indirectly, though the perceived impact of these topics varies among members. This is complicated by internal divisions on social issues and disagreement about how much the union should be involved in

these debates. Members expressed differing opinions on the time and resources the union should allocate outside of core issues.

How Meetings Are Run

Some members appreciate the meetings as a space that allows people to participate, offer their opinions, and have their voices heard. Others find them exclusionary, viewing them more like presentations of decisions leadership has already made. Striking the right balance between a desire to hear all voices and be as democratic as possible and running an orderly meeting remains an ongoing challenge. Additionally, members have a wide range of comfort levels with speaking publicly, which both unions do try to address through outreach, training, and one-on-one relationship building.

Issues discussed at the meetings are often noncontroversial items that require little discussion. These result in quick up-and-down votes that can feel like a mere rubber stamp to some members. Relatedly, while some feel like members have the opportunity to make objections and have genuine debate, others feel like debate is stifled and their voices aren't heard. One issue is that retirees can be especially vocal, drowning out current members. Another is the feeling that leadership has already made decisions on certain issues, such as endorsements.

In the industrial union, some expressed a perception that there is insufficient space for right-leaning points of view, which can be alienating.

One-on-One Conversations and Mentors

In accordance with social science literature on civic engagement, one-on-one interaction and communication appear important to increasing participation in union democracy. Interviewees described how much more effective they are at encouraging member participation and sustained involvement than passive requests, such as asking someone to just sign a petition or form. One-on-one discussions create genuine investment and act as avenues for building capacity and interest for future union activities. Similarly, a personal invitation is more effective for getting someone to show up or ensuring participation than a generalized call to action.

People also reported becoming more involved and more confident in their abilities to lead through mentors within the union. Having a mentor personally encourage a member and help teach them how to engage effectively is powerful.

Member stories of how they initially engaged in union activity may offer insight into how people become politically engaged. What is the impetus that drives further action?

The interviews suggest three catalysts for initial member engagement that appear to result in increased participation: a personal ask, the discovery of community through the union, or a negative experience at work/needing a union's help. For example:

- The teacher next-door suggested, "You should come to a monthly meeting," or "you need to get the union's help."
- Many times, colleagues asked the member to get more involved in the union due to their particular skills or personality.
- Several industrial union members talked about going through the initial training course together and how that led to a sense of community and deepened their union involvement.

Indeed, research around "relational organizing" that relies on personal outreach, including more than a decade of scholarship by Hahrie Han, has consistently found that personal relationships are a better driver of participation than impersonal and/or mass appeals.

Internal Union Voting: Union Offices, Policies, Contract Issues

Both unions provide numerous opportunities to vote on a variety of union-related business, including multiple layers of union leadership positions. In fact, union leaders often believe they are democratic to a fault in this sense. However, this does not always translate into member participation, as turnout in some union office elections remains low (albeit not low relative to many local elections that often have terrible turnout numbers).

Voting differs significantly between the two unions. The education union used to have in-person voting only. Over time, they lowered barriers, first allowing people to request a mail ballot, and then mailing everyone a ballot. They still offer one day of in-person voting. Nonetheless, turnout remains disproportionately skewed toward retirees. Leadership does little to increase participation, leaving it to the candidates to drive voter turnout.

Interestingly, despite offering hybrid membership meetings, the industrial union's elections are only in person. Voting occurs at the union hall via paper ballot from 8:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. over the course of a single day. In-plant voting is also offered, requiring an ID and verification on a member list.

Working on a Political Campaign

Some interviewees indicated that the union tried to recruit workers to participate in political campaign work, such as door-knocking and phone-banking for endorsed candidates. However, only a few members were inclined to participate. For some, it was a time issue, while others expressed personal discomfort. Consequently, this type of campaign work was largely confined to people who were predisposed to political activism. Notably, even though the education union pays people to do some of this work, that did not seem to be much of a draw. While a few people agreed that canvassing could be a social activity, most simply did not want to take part in these activities.

By contrast, members were more inclined to be involved in group activities, such as rallies around negotiating or policy issues. Interestingly, HTUP survey data shows that engagement in specific union activities clearly correlates with higher political involvement: respondents who participated in union-related rallies were approximately five times more likely to report working on a political campaign.

Running for a Union Office

While elections for union office are generally unopposed, several interviewees had run for a union office. In some cases, they found the process straightforward, but it did require outreach and campaigning. For example, to run for office at the industrial union, candidates must collect 50 signatures to get on the ballot.

Multiple interviewees noted a lack of transparency around the election process. They indicated that there was little guidance on how to run for office, that they were unaware of open positions, and that members were not actively encouraged to run.

Implications and Practical Suggestions for Unions

Unions seeking to strengthen both internal engagement and external civic participation should prioritize community building and social activities that foster a sense of belonging among members. Effective pathways include:

- **Foster small-group connections:** Create recurring opportunities for members to connect in small groups, whether through committees, training cohorts, or other recurring formats. These smaller, more intimate settings appear to build the necessary trust and confidence for members to engage more broadly, both inside and outside the union.
- **Encourage leadership development:** Provide trainings and other activities designed to build leadership skills and capacity that can translate across issues and campaigns, building confidence and a sense of agency.
- **Create a social community:** Offer opportunities for socializing outside the workplace and involve members' families, based on what membership expresses an interest in doing together.
- **Allocate resources to support community building:** Consider strategically reallocating a small portion of resources from paid political mobilization to longer-term community building efforts among networks of union families.
- **Focus on skill building:** In addition to political education about issues and candidates, provide programs that help members develop the skills they need to work through policy issues and become advocates.
- **Partner with aligned organizations** and other unions in ways that make connections across issues and priorities.
- **Employ individualized outreach:** People respond more positively to individual requests for participation rather than mass outreach only.
- **Make it personal and real:** Emphasize how members can leverage their unique talents and skills to influence specific issues that affect them.
- **Reduce participation barriers:** Provide childcare at meetings and include families at union events to increase participation among members with caregiving responsibilities. Consider rotating meeting locations to be more accessible to different groups. Assess the balance of virtual and in-person meetings.
- **Empower members:** Encourage members to take on roles where they are given agency and ownership over union activities, rather than asking them to perform predetermined tasks.
- **Employ mentors and (when possible) retirees:** Leverage the participation of mentors and, specifically, retired members; this prevents social isolation and transforms them into active, engaged assets.
- **Encourage members to vote in union elections and run as candidates:** Make participation in union elections as accessible as possible by providing information and resources on how to do so.
- **Balance digital and in-person engagement:** Supplement the accessibility of virtual meetings with intentional, in-person relational activities to ensure social bonds remain strong.
- **Communicate and celebrate wins**, even small ones.

- **Connect across party identity:** Identify and clarify how positions and candidate endorsements align with and further the priorities of members and working people, regardless of broad ideology or identity. This can happen as soon as the first orientation for new members.[24]

Conclusion

This study set out to investigate not merely **whether** union membership is associated with higher rates of civic and electoral engagement — a relationship well established in the literature — but **how** and **why** that is the case. Drawing on a survey of HTUP participants, HTUP focus groups, and in-depth interviews with members of two unions, we find meaningful support for both of our guiding hypotheses.

First, unions build community. At their best, they function as "political homes": spaces where members forge bonds of solidarity, develop shared values, and cultivate a collective sense of purpose that extends well beyond the workplace. Our evidence suggests that this sense of belonging — reinforced through small-group settings, family-inclusive social events, mentorship relationships, and one-on-one outreach — builds the kind of trust and efficacy that motivates members to engage not only within the union but in civic and democratic life more broadly.

Second, unions are schools of democracy. By offering members opportunities to practice public speaking, policy analysis, negotiation, and organizing — through leadership trainings, legislative testimony, committee work, and political education programs — unions help demystify political institutions and build the concrete civic skills that transfer to broader participation. Survey respondents overwhelmingly reported that union participation increased their confidence in speaking publicly, and those involved in collective activities such as rallies were substantially more likely to volunteer on political campaigns. Framing also matters: when unions contextualize their work within a broader movement of working people, and when they connect candidate endorsements to members' lived priorities across partisan lines, they create a more inclusive and compelling case for engagement.

At the same time, this study surfaces some ongoing challenges. Low turnout in internal union elections, uneven participation in events and trainings, and concerns about unequal voice reveal that significant work remains. The double-edged nature of technology — expanding reach and accessibility on one hand, while risking shallower social bonds on the other — requires careful consideration. Finally, political differences among members underscore that civic engagement efforts must bridge partisan identities, grounding appeals in members' shared material interests rather than broad ideological alignment.

These findings carry direct implications for unions seeking to strengthen both internal participation and external civic engagement. We emphasize that these findings are drawn from a nonrepresentative sample of highly engaged union members; as such, they are best understood as promising threads for future inquiry rather than definitive conclusions. The most urgent next step for researchers is to expand the scope of this work to include less engaged members — those who have disengaged from or never fully connected with union life — whose perspectives are critical to understanding the full range of members' civic trajectories.

Beyond expanding scope, future research should rigorously test the interventions identified here: Do small-group trainings foster a stronger sense of collective identity than large-scale ones? Does mentorship reliably lead to escalating civic involvement? Does framing union

participation as part of a broader labor movement increase member engagement? Experimental and quasi-experimental designs, developed through partnerships between unions and academic researchers, offer the most reliable path to answering these questions.

At a moment when civic participation is contested and democratic institutions are under strain, unions remain one of the few institutions in American life with the infrastructure, trust, and mission to cultivate engaged citizens at scale — particularly among working-class individuals who are otherwise less likely to be reached by conventional civic outreach. Ultimately, this study suggests that the pathway from union membership to civic engagement is real, and that it runs through both the heart and the mind, through belonging and through practice.

Appendix A

Next Steps for Research

- **Expand the scope of research:** While this study highlights promising practices, further research is needed to capture the perspectives of less engaged members across the spectrum of union and civic activity.
- **Rigorously test interventions:** Future research should seek to experimentally test the impact of specific union activities — such as small-group participation, mentorship programs, leadership trainings, and new member orientations — on civic and electoral engagement.

Questions for Subsequent Research

Community and Belonging

- Do trainings build a sense of collective values and goals? If so, are some types of trainings, such as those conducted in small groups, better in this regard than others?
- Does the union framing of a working-class or labor identity effectively build a sense of collective values and goals?
  - If so, does that lead to greater engagement?
- Does framing participation as part of a broader movement in communications lead to a change in members' collective values and goals?
  - If so, does that lead to greater engagement?
- Are group activities that emphasize identification with the local union, rather than broader labor or the national union, more effective at building collective values and goals?
  - If so, does this lead to greater participation?
- Are unions "political homes," which prior research indicates are a potential boon to civic engagement?
  - If so, would further exploration of unions as political homes contribute to understanding the impact of unions on civic engagement?
- Do social events build or reinforce a sense of collective goals and values that translate into greater participation?
- Does being a member of coalitions create a broader sense of civic responsibility?

Unions as Schools of Democracy

- Which mediums appear to be the most effective in increasing civic engagement or knowledge?
- Does member engagement through social media lead to more engagement in other forms?
  - Does this pattern vary across different demographic groups, especially age?
- To what degree does education regarding political and economic history and institutions enable civic engagement?
- To what degree does skill building improve civic engagement, and which skills contribute most to this improvement?
- Does union support for a candidate or issue increase confidence in that vote, thereby increasing political participation among members?
- Does education regarding political candidates or explicit endorsements lead to greater or lesser internal engagement?
- Does education about core issues, rather than broader socioeconomic issues, lend itself to greater civic engagement?
  - Does this pattern vary across different demographic groups?
- Does the discussion and exploration of noncore issues lend itself to greater or lesser internal democratic engagement?
- Does training on how to participate in democratic practices within the union lead to greater participation in democratic practices outside of the union?
- Does participation in regularly occurring courses that focus on building advocacy skills result in greater civic and electoral engagement?
- Are committees effective arenas for meaningful democratic practice that lead to greater engagement?
- What role do contentious contract negotiations play in developing engagement and leadership skills among members?
- Does serving in union leadership capacities lead to an escalation of responsibility, involvement, or external civic engagement?
- Does participation in meetings build skills for democratic participation?
- Would increased participation in meetings lead to increased participation in other realms?
- Is in-person meeting attendance necessary to build collective action and maximize participation, or is it more important for democracy skill building that a maximum number of people be able to attend in some form?
- Does focusing on broader issues make people more likely to be aware of and engaged in those issues?
- Or do people just want the union to stick to its business, otherwise they tune out and never reap any of the benefits of participation?
- Does a climate where members feel free to express opposing views within the union impact civic engagement?
- Does internal union voting provide skill building or efficacy that leads to greater external participation?
- Does the frequency of internal union voting matter? What about the form of voting available?
- Does participating in a campaign through the union build democratic skills?

- What is the impact of having one-on-one meetings about union activity, issues, etc. on participation?
- What is the impact of individual mentoring?
- Does how someone was recruited or discovered the power of the union impact their likelihood of participation?
- Does running for a union office increase the likelihood of participating outside of the union?

Appendix B

Descriptive Analysis of Statistical Data

1. When asked where their union should focus, respondents allocated an average of 47 points (of 100) to workplace issues, 28 points to state issues, and 25 points to national issues.
2. Those who indicated that "fellow union members are an important part of my social life" were 17 times more likely to believe their union was a community they belonged to.
3. Those who felt their union was a community they belonged to were 11 times more likely to engage in union political activities such as phone banks and canvasses.
4. People who participated in campaign rallies were nearly five times as likely to have worked on a political campaign as those who did not.
5. Those who participated in committee/small-group meetings within their union were more than twice as likely to vote in a local election.
6. Those who participated in union-led political campaign activities were nearly twice as likely to donate money to a candidate or cause.
7. Those who strongly agreed that their union was a community that they belonged to were more than 11 times more likely to participate in a union-led political campaign activities like phone banking or canvassing.
8. Social events were the most attended union-related activity, with 83% of respondents reporting attendance.
9. The majority (61%) of people voted in union elections (not surprising for HTUP), but one-fifth of people believed their union had not held an election in the past two years (This seems unlikely).
10. 95% of people voted in the 2024 election, which is significantly higher than the percentage that voted in union elections (61%).
11. Voting in a federal (90%) or local (92%) election were the most common political activities that people participated in, followed by donating money to a candidate or cause (76%) and attending a political meeting (76%).
12. "Volunteering in your community" was the most common non-union communal activity that respondents joined (72%).
13. 31% had a graduate or professional degree, which signifies that this sample is much more educated than the typical union member (which we already assumed).
14. 76% of respondents said participating in union activities made them "much more confident" (49%) or "more confident" (27%) about expressing their opinions publicly.

Descriptive Analysis (from ChatGPT) of Free Response Answers

1. Demographic Question: What industry do you work in?
   a. Labor/union staff/labor relations = 36%
   b. Construction trades = 17%
   c. Public safety (fire/EMS/police) = 13%
   d. Education = 8%
   e. Government = 7%
2. Demographic Question: What union are you a member of?
   a. AFSCME – American Federation of State, County & Municipal Employees = 13%
   b. IAFF – International Association of Fire Fighters = 10%
   c. IUOE – International Union of Operating Engineers = 7%
   d. USW – United Steelworkers = 6%
   e. LIUNA – Laborers' International Union of North America = 4%
   f. IBEW – International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers = 4%
3. Question: "How, if at all, has your union involvement influenced your participation in your community?"
   a. *Response Theme:* Union involvement increases community engagement
      "My Union involvement influenced me to participate… by fostering a sense of solidarity and motivating me to volunteer, support local causes, and help those in need."
      "My union involvement instilled a sense of community and concern for fellow workers and helping people… as well as the nation and world."
   b. *Theme:* Union involvement builds confidence, identity, and skills that spill into community activity
      "Gave personal confidence to be active in my community."
      "Immensely. It has given me the self-confidence to not be afraid to participate outside of the union."
      "Working with others provides a sense of ease and approachability… gives a sense of hope to a mountainous obstacle."
   c. *Theme:* Union involvement provides structured opportunities for community engagement
      "My union does a Christmas party… and oversees MDA fundraising."
      "Food banks are a big part of how I give back… and my union participates in these year-round."
   d. *Theme:* A noticeable minority felt union involvement does not influence community participation
      "Minimal — I'm involved in my community which is not where my union typically participates."
      "IT hasn't — I have always been involved."
      This was less than 20% of the responses.
4. Question: "How, if at all, has your union involvement influenced your likelihood of voting?"
   a. *Theme:* Union involvement increases likelihood of voting
      "Now I make sure to vote in every single election."
      "I vote every election because my livelihood depends upon it."
   b. *Theme:* Political education provided by unions increases informed voting
      "They educate us on issues that affect working people."
      "AFSCME informs my family about candidate stances and we vote accordingly."

   c. *Theme:* Union involvement influences *how* people vote — specifically toward pro-labor candidates
      "I would never vote for a conservative candidate with anti-union views."
      "We support elected officials who support public services and social justice."
   d. *Theme:* A noticeable minority felt union involvement does not influence voting behavior
      "I have always voted."
      "I was raised in a union family and voting was already a priority."
      "Voting is compulsory in Australia."
5. Question: Why does participating in union activities make you feel (much more confident/more confident/no change in confidence) about expressing my opinion publicly?
   a. *Theme:* Those who chose "much more confident" (49%) or "more confident" (27%) cited increased education on the issues, practice public speaking, support/solidarity, and a better understanding of the importance of speaking out.
      "Because it has given me an education and knowledge to feel confident in my voice."
      "Opportunities to speak in front of community members, union members, and local councils."
      "I don't feel alone and feel supported in my advocacy."
      "We cannot remain silent . . . unity and solidarity will bring change."
   b. *Theme:* Those who chose "no change in confidence" (24%) cited preexisting confidence, a more conservative union culture, and personal dissatisfaction with their union.
      "I grew up in a political household and have always felt confident."
      "My union and leadership are conservative about taking a stance on issues."
      "Because it fits. Unions have lost muscle with Democrat decisions and liberal BS."

Statistical Analysis

Overview:

1. Social involvement correlates with a sense of belonging.
2. Sense of belonging correlates with union activities, though the direction of the relationship remains unclear. Union activities may also be responsible for generating a sense of belonging.
3. Politically oriented union activities correlate with broader political activities.
4. Small-groups and committee participation increases the likelihood of voting in local elections.
5. Union voting correlates with a range of political activities.
6. Involvement in the social life of the union correlates with a sense of belonging within the union.

Predictor (. . . union and my fellow union members are an important part of my social life)	Outcome (. . . union is a community that I belong to)	Odds Ratio	P-value
Strongly agree	Strongly agree	17.81	0.000
Agree	Agree	10.51	0.000
Strongly agree	Agree	6.66	0.000
Somewhat agree	Agree	4.97	0.000

Sense of belonging correlates to union activities. But union activities may also be responsible for a sense of belonging.

Predictor (. . . union is a community that I belong to)	Outcome (Union Activity)	Odds Ratio	P-value
Strongly agree	Union-led political campaign activities like phone banking or canvassing	11.45	0.000
Strongly agree	Rallies	7.54	0.000
Strongly agree	Social events	4.97	0.001
Strongly agree	Committee/small group meetings	4.49	0.003
Strongly agree	Regularly scheduled member meetings	3.88	0.007

Politically oriented union activities correlate to broader political activities.
Small groups and committees increase chances of voting in local elections.

Union Activity	Political Activity	Odds Ratio	P-value
Union-led political campaign activities	Work on a political campaign	7.54	0.000
Phone banking or canvassing	Work on a political campaign	7.54	0.000
Rallies	Work on a political campaign	4.97	0.000
Committee/small group meetings	Vote in a local election	2.22	0.021
Union-led political campaign activities	Donate money to a candidate or a cause	2.05	0.045
Phone banking or canvassing	Donate money to a candidate or a cause	2.05	0.045

Union voting correlates to a range of political activities.

Union Voting Response (Predictor)	Political Activity (Outcome)	Odds Ratio	P-value
I definitely voted in one or more union elections.	Donate money to a candidate or a cause	3.88	0.009
I definitely voted in one or more union elections.	Work on a political campaign	3.74	0.013
I definitely voted in one or more union elections.	Attend a political meeting	3.17	0.013

Notes

1. With the research support of Yoorie Chang, Gabriella Cantor, and Drisana Hughes.
2. Tova Wang, "Union Impact on Voter Participation – and How to Expand It," Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation, Harvard Kennedy School, June 2020.
3. Patrick Flavin and Benjamin Radcliff, "Labor Union Membership and Voting across Nations," *Electoral Studies* 30, no. 4 (December 2011): 637; Jake Rosenfeld, *What Unions No Longer Do* (Harvard University Press, 2014), 170. He comes to this conclusion using the Current Population Study and the National Election Study, comparing union members and non-union members controlling "for the observed correlates in order to isolate the impact of union membership."
4. Lainey Newman and Theda Skocpol, *Rust Belt Union Blues: Why Working-Class Voters Are Turning Away from the Democratic Party* (Columbia University Press, 2023).
5. Newman and Skocpol, *Rust Belt Union Blues*, 23.
6. Hahrie Han, *Undivided: The Quest for Racial Solidarity in an American Church* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2024).
7. Han, *Undivided,* 25.
8. Han, *Undivided,* 26.
9. Katrina Gamble, Christian Hosam, and Destiney Golden, "Belonging, Community & Impact: What It Means to Build a Political Home," Sojourn Strategies, 2022, https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/64f792f5c75211da2323184e/65109999f5d06a1a28930901_belonging%20community%20and%20impact_Political%20Home%20Report%202022.pdf.

10. Veronica Terriquez, "Schools for Democracy: Labor Union Participation and Latino Immigrant Parents' School-Based Civic Engagement," *American Sociological Review* 76, no. 4 (2011): 581–601, https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122411414815.
11. Bruce Nisson, "Political Activism as Part of a Broader Civic Engagement: The Case of SEIU Florida Healthcare Union," *Labor Studies Journal* 35, no. 1 (2010): 51-72, https://doi.org/10.1177/0160449X09353038.
12. Jan E. Leighley and Jonathan Nagler*, Who Votes Now?: Demographics, Issues, Inequality, and Turnout in the United States,* (Princeton University Press, 2014).
13. Jake Rosenfeld, "Economic Determinants of Voting in an Era of Union Decline." *Social Science Quarterly*, 91 (2010): 379-395.
14. Jasmine Kerrissey and Evan Schofer, "Union Membership and Political Participation in the United States," *Social Forces* 91, no. 3 (2013): 895–928, http://www.jstor.org/stable/23361125.
15. Sarah Sobieraj and Deborah White, "Taxing Political Life: Reevaluating the Relationship between Voluntary Association Membership, Political Engagement, and the State," *The Sociological Quarterly* 45, no. 4 (2004): 739–64, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1533-8525.2004.tb02312.x.
16. Alexander Hertel-Fernandez, "Power and Politics in the U.S. Workplace: What Imbalances of Workplace Power Mean for Civic Engagement — and Democracy," Economic Policy Institute, October 7, 2020, https://www.epi.org/unequalpower/publications/power-and-politics-in-the-u-s-workplace -what-imbalances-of-workplace-power-mean-for-civic-engagement-and-democracy/.
17. Hertel-Fernandez, "Power and Politics," 2.
18. Nisson, "Political Activism."
19. Terriquez, "Schools for Democracy," 581–601.
20. Han, *Undivided,* 33.
21. Odds of a member engaging in a union activity engaging in a political activity.
22. Terriquez, "Schools for Democracy," 581–601.
23. Nisson, "Political Activism," 51–72.
24. For more on the significance of member orientations for creating a culture of participation, see Alexander Hertel-Fernandez, "Civic Organizations and the Political Participation of Cross-Pressured Americans: The Case of the Labor Movement," *American Political Science Review* 119, no. 3 (2025): 1173–89, doi:10.1017/S0003055424000856.

A PUBLICATION OF THE

Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation
Harvard Kennedy School
79 John F. Kennedy Street
Cambridge, MA 02138

617-495-0557
ash.harvard.edu

HARVARD Kennedy School
ASH CENTER
for Democratic Governance
and Innovation